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# **Party Mandates and the Politics of Attention: Party platforms, public priorities and the policy agenda in Britain**

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## **Abstract**

This paper develops an attention-based model of party mandates and policy agendas, where parties and governments are faced with an abundance of issues, and must divide their scarce attention across them. In government, parties must balance their desire to deliver on their electoral mandate (i.e. the “promissory agenda”) with a need to continuously adapt their policy priorities in response to changes in public concerns and to deal with unexpected events and the emergence of new problems (i.e. the “anticipatory agenda”). Parties elected to office also have incentives to respond to issues prioritized by the platforms of their rivals. To test this theory, time series cross-sectional models are used to investigate how the policy content of the legislative program of British government responds to governing and opposition party platforms, the executive agenda, issue priorities of the public and mass media.

## **Keywords**

Party mandate, policy agendas, problem-solving, public opinion

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An essential question for the study of party government is the degree to which the policy programs of parties in government are shaped through promises made to voters at election time, or instead are responsive to shorter-term pressures, such as events, media and public opinion. This linkage between mass publics and parties encapsulates the promissory and anticipatory elements of representative party government: parties must retrospectively build on long-term policy commitments, but at the same time formulate their policy priorities in the knowledge that the failure to represent current public concerns may result in electoral punishment in the future. Policy-makers must reconcile their past pledges with incoming information streams, and decide which problems to attend to and prioritize for action (Jones 1994; 2001; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). In this sense, party mandates coexist with agenda-setting processes, i.e. mechanisms through which a political system processes information to produce public policies.

The challenge of delivering on election mandates at the same time as responding to current public concerns and policy problems is made more acute through the abundance of information that decision-makers are faced with on the agenda at any moment in time (Cobb and Elder 1983; Cobb et al. 1976; Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 2005; Adler and Wilkerson 2012). This requires parties in government to cope with this excess of information by prioritizing some problems, while disregarding others. In doing so, parties are concerned with delivering on commitments made in election platforms at the same time as maintaining a reputation for good government as a trusted manager of the economy, national security and public services. Once in office, parties need to prioritize not only issues related to their election mandate, but also those emphasized by other actors, such as rival parties, the mass media and public opinion. Drift in the correspondence between election platforms and the policy agenda over time therefore combines what Mansbridge (2003) calls “promissory” and “anticipatory” models of representation. The former refers to the degree to which policy-

makers deliver on promises made to voters during campaigns, while the latter refers to their calculation of what policy priorities voters are expected to reward in the future.

Parties in government must balance their desire to deliver on electoral mandates (the “promissory agenda”) with a need to continuously update their policy priorities in response to changes in public concerns and to information about the state of the world, as new problems arise and events occur which require attention and action (the “anticipatory agenda”).

Hofferbert and Budge (1992, p. 158) importantly note that the *reduced impact* of the party mandate specifically offers ‘... an indication of parties’ responsiveness to the society around them and their relative ability and commitment to follow through on society’s agenda.’ In this sense, the influence of party mandates on the public policies implemented can weaken as a result of ‘external pressure’ (Walgrave et al. 2006) and new issues being forced onto the agenda by the intervention of other actors within the system (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). In this sense, we argue that the representational linkage between party platforms and the policy agenda of government is mediated by the continuous updating of policy priorities in light of issues of immediate public concern and the need for policy-makers to attend to new problems and changing policy conditions.

The remainder of this paper takes the following form. We start by discussing theories of party mandates, agenda-setting and representation. These are used to develop an attention-based model of party mandates and policy agendas which consists of both promissory and anticipatory components. Next we derive specific expectations on the basis of this model and features of the British party and governmental systems. We then introduce the data used to test our expectations, before undertaking time-series cross-sectional analysis of the linkage between party platforms, public priorities, the media agenda and legislative programs in Britain from 1983 to 2008. We conclude with a discussion of the results in the British context and reflect upon implications for other political systems.

## **Party mandates, agendas and representation**

### *The “promissory agenda”: party mandates and electoral promises*

Political parties have long been argued to be ‘indispensable instruments’ of popular government (APSA 1950). In the responsible party model, citizens are expected to vote for the party whose policy program is closest to their preferences (for an extensive discussion see Adams 2001). Responsible parties will in turn carry out those programs upon being elected to office – or face the wrath of the electorate at future elections. Parties are also “responsible” in the sense of overseeing the general management of government and development of policies, and their outcomes (APSA 1950, p. 23). More generally, the impacts of party and electoral change on the actions of government are pivotal to debates over the nature of representation in advanced democracies (e.g. Klingemann et al. 1994; Przeworski et al. 1999; Budge et al. 2012; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014).

Mandate theory accordingly argues that elections are the principal mechanism for the translation of citizens’ preferences into public policy (e.g. McDonald et al. 2004; McDonald and Budge 2005). Party mandates can be conceptualized in several forms (for a discussion, see Louwerse 2011). Some link mandates with the fulfilment of specific manifesto pledges (e.g. Rose 1980; Bara 2005). In those studies, party platforms provide parties an opportunity to make commitments to action on particular policies and for voters to make choices on the basis of this information. Pledges thus act as a set of high profile and specific promises that parties then seek to deliver on. Parties’ policy priorities are then translated into a mandate for

government, indicating the bundle of issues – and some of the specific measures – that the party will prioritize if elected to office.<sup>1</sup>

A substantial line of research has considered the claim that parties deliver distinct policy agendas and policy outcomes that reflect the ideological preferences of their voters (for a meta-analysis, see Imbeau et al. 2001). Some studies suggest that partisan control of government impacts on levels of public spending (e.g. Castles 1982; Castles and McKinlay, 1979; Blais et al. 1993). Beyond tests of differences between the color of party government, there is also evidence that party platforms impact on spending (Budge and Hofferbert 1990; 1992).<sup>2</sup> Only recently, however, have scholars begun to explore the link between partisan and institutional agendas. Several studies now show that party control of government matters for the content of the policy agenda (see Baumgartner et al. 2009; Jennings et al. 2011; Persico et al. 2012; Froio 2012; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014) even if the degree of influence appears to be limited and largely dependent on the policy domain in question.

While parties clearly matter for public policy, the strength of the party mandate should not be overstated. It is argued that globalization has led to a weakening of the effect of party mandates over time (Boix 2000). As domestic governments have lost autonomy to intervene in domestic economies, parties are more constrained in shaping policy outputs to reflect the preferences of voters (Mair 2008; Scharpf 2000; Hellwig 2014). This reflects a broader point

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<sup>1</sup> Between elections, prominent statements of policy commitments can act as non-electoral mandates for parties in office as they seek to carry out their agenda in subsequent legislative sessions (e.g. Bevan et al. 2011).

<sup>2</sup> While spending is an indicator of policy priorities, it does not always function accordingly. A party might emphasise the issue of welfare as a priority in its platform, for example, but favour cuts rather than more spending.

that parties in government are subject to a range of external pressures that may lead to substantial drift away from the policy intentions set out in election platforms.

*The “anticipatory agenda”: problem-solving and responsiveness to public opinion*

In office, parties cannot always act exclusively as agents of the electoral mandate. If parties are responsible “trustees” they also must consider the broader interests of citizens, and the conduct of public policy (APSA 1950, p. 22; also see Burke 1968 on the trustee model of representation). In practice, parties in government ‘juggle numerous issues simultaneously’ (Jones and Baumgartner 2005a, p. 6), with most issues relegated to policy subsystems where decision-making takes place in low conflict situations far from the electoral promises made to voters. Sudden, unpredictable “focusing” or “trigger” events (Cobb and Elder 1983; Birkland 1997), such as terrorist attacks, protests or government scandals, can require decision-makers to shift their attention to new issues or problems. New understandings of policy problems can lead to the disruption of party programs established at election time. Governments can come under pressure to change course in response to issues being thrown into the media and public spotlight – bringing calls for legislative or executive action.

Problem-solving is an overriding concern of government, requiring decision-makers to divide their attention across a range of social and economic problems and to manage the most salient and most urgent (Jones 1994; 2001; Döring 1995; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Mayhew 2006; Adler and Wilkerson 2012). Policy-makers possess scarce institutional and cognitive resources to process the vast array of issues that they are faced with at any moment in time. Only so many issues can be earmarked for immediate action, while others must wait for attention and some disregarded altogether. While parties in government may seek to deliver on electoral platforms and existing policy commitments, the necessities of competent and responsible government require them to be adaptive to the emergence of new issues and problems. For example, an economic crisis or serious threat to national security might require

policy-makers to diverge from their existing policy commitments and instead prioritize more immediate concerns. Problem-solving is a dominant strategy, Adler and Wilkerson (2012, p. 6) argue, because the public ‘share common concerns on many issues.’ Problem-solving of this sort is interlinked with responsiveness to changes in public priorities, since issues of public concern themselves are a function of problem-status in particular domains (e.g. Hibbs 1979; Wlezien 2005).

“Rational anticipation” of future election outcomes, or ‘anticipatory representation’ as Mansbridge calls it (2003), thus underpins pressure for parties in government to respond to shifts in public opinion at the same time as delivering on their electoral promises. Studies of democratic responsiveness have highlighted the role of *public opinion* in continuously shaping the policy outputs of government as an adaptive and iterative process (Stimson et al. 1995; Wlezien 1996; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). The same influence of public opinion can also be found in *government attention*. Studies of agenda representation assess the degree to which policy priorities of government correspond to the issue priorities of the public across different policy domains and institutional venues (Jones and Baumgartner 2004; Jones et al. 2009; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Lindeboom 2012). Others, like studies of policy responsiveness, conceive this representational relationship as a *dynamic* process, with public priorities and the policy agenda equilibrating in response to one another over time (Jennings and John 2009; Bevan and Jennings 2014). The idea of ‘dynamic agenda representation’ implies that the priorities of policy-makers respond to the concerns of citizens, selectively assigning their attention across issues and dealing with policy problems on their behalf (Bevan and Jennings 2014).

Delivering on electoral mandates and adapting to short-term changes in public opinion are not the only factors that shape the composition of the policy agenda. Lawmakers are subject to pressure on a daily basis through issues highlighted and campaigned on by mass



media. While parties in government may be seeking to deliver on electoral platforms, mass media can also exert considerable influence in drawing attention to, or constraining debate over, policy problems on the agenda. Studies of the influence of media coverage on political agendas reveal considerable variation, and the importance of issue types (Edwards and Wood 1999; Soroka 2002; Walgrave et al. 2008; Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Baumgartner and Chaqués-Bonanfont 2013).

In this regard, mass media can perform a *mediating* or *moderating* role in the inter-relationship between electoral mandates and the policy agenda of government. Media issue attention is shown to have effects on the content of the political agenda (Soroka 2002; Walgrave et al. 2008; Thesen 2013), and can also act as a supplier of information about the existence of policy problems that require attention from government. Hence, media may further disrupt electoral mandates by bringing new issues onto the societal agenda. After all, mass media has long been known to influence the issues that government and the public pay attention to (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Soroka 2002; McCombs 2014).

This literature seems to confirm that distinct from indirect representation through the mechanism of elections (i.e. mandates), direct adjustment of the policy agenda in reaction to changes in public priorities is expected due to the logic of ‘rational anticipation’ (Stimson et al. 1995, p. 543) as policy-makers anticipate the future electoral costs of unpopular decisions. This gives rise to a continuous process of adaptation in response to public concerns. Given the intrinsic scarcity of attention, governing parties must strike a balance between delivering on electoral mandates, and responding to shorter-term changes in public opinion and the emergence of new problems on the agenda. These countervailing forces may explain drift from party mandates, or alternatively explain why policy agendas are not perfectly responsive

to the public agenda. The information updating process underpins our attention-based model of party mandates and policy agendas.

### **Electoral mandates, public priorities and the legislative agenda in Britain**

Theories of party mandates and agenda-setting offer us clear expectations about the responsiveness of policy agendas to parties' electoral mandates and the possibility of drift from those platforms due to pressure on lawmakers to adapt to public opinion, other actors and events. Our attention-based model of party mandates and policy agendas suggests that promissory responsiveness (desire of policy-makers to deliver on their electoral promises) will be mitigated by anticipatory responsiveness (desire of policy-makers to avoid future electoral sanction for unpopular or incompetent decisions). This is the theory, how might it work in practice?

In this paper we consider the case of British government in its traditional majoritarian form, i.e. the archetypal Westminster system (Lijphart 2012), prior to its recent experience of coalition politics and shift towards greater multipartism. Over most of the period since 1945, single-party government dominated in Britain. In this context, platforms were designed to provide clearer statements of intentions than in other proportional systems (Powell, 2000). It would therefore be expected that the platform of the election-winning party would exert a strong influence upon its legislative agenda in office. As such, parties elected, or re-elected, to office would seek to deliver on promises made to voters. The British political system offers a perfect test case for whether parties deliver on electoral mandates in a highly majoritarian system where strong executives should have more capacity to control the legislative agenda – and the vast majority of bills proposed by the government are passed into law. Governing parties might, however, also be expected to respond to issues raised by their main opponents, seeking to pursue a consensual policy agenda that attracts support from across the political

spectrum or otherwise neutralize issues on the party system agenda that are problematic to them. A further theoretical expectation, then, is that the policy agenda of government may also respond to the election platform of both the government and the main opposition party (drawing on Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). Through emphasizing issues typically associated with their opponents, governing parties can also help undermine traditional party reputations for the ownership of certain issues and can “trespass” on issues belonging to their competitors (Damore 2004; Sides 2007).

In the British case, the legislative agenda is heavily influenced by the non-electoral mandate communicated in the Queen’s Speech, the executive’s statement of policy priorities at the start of each session of parliament (Bevan et al. 2011) which differs from party mandates (Bara 2005) and represents the party system agenda in office (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). The Queen’s Speech performs the important role in *formally* setting out the legislative agenda, as well as priorities of the executive more broadly. Further, in Britain’s majoritarian system, where power is highly concentrated (Powell 2004), legislative proposals are typically initiated by the executive which – historically – has tended to hold a working majority of seats in the legislature. It would therefore be expected that this non-electoral mandate would bind the British government to its announced legislative intentions for each session.

These policy priorities are, of course, influenced by electoral promises, especially in the first speech after a general election. However, they also differ substantially from electoral mandates, functioning as vehicles for statecraft as policy-makers respond to events, and to the success or failure of policies, over the course of the election cycle. In this sense, executive speeches may drift considerably from electoral mandates at different points in the electoral cycle, as they incorporate information and events that were not foreseeable at the time of the previous election. Reflecting both the “rational anticipation” of future election outcomes

(Stimson et al. 1995) and external pressures and disruption from policy problems on a day-to-day basis, we thus expect the legislative agenda to be responsive to the current issue priorities of the public, as well as to the media agenda. The latter can be approximated to the supply of information about new policy problems on the societal agenda in general, so reflects both the agenda-setting power of the mass media and the occurrence of focusing events.

Our expectations derived from mandate theory and attention-driven choice point to competing pressures on the legislative agenda of British government; specifically *promissory* responsiveness to party platforms and *anticipatory* responsiveness to issues of current public concern and focusing events. We expect government to seek to deliver on its electoral mandate (while being mindful of the policy platform of its opponents) at the same time as updating priorities in response to more immediate matters of public concern and problems that emerge on the agenda at short notice. That is our theory, what do the analyses reveal?

## **Data**

We now test these expectations for the case of Britain: firstly, concerning whether party platforms at general elections shape the legislative program of British government over the following parliamentary cycle; secondly, whether that legislative program also responds to non-electoral mandates communicated through the executive agenda in the Queen's Speech; and, thirdly, whether the legislative program is also shaped by public priorities and the media agenda.

Our analysis is based on data on party platforms, the executive agenda, legislation, public priorities and news media in Britain from 1983 to 2008 and derived from theory-informed specification of models that test the separate elements of our unified model. This data is all coded according to the policy content coding system of the UK Policy Agendas Project ([www.policyagendas.org.uk](http://www.policyagendas.org.uk)). The advantages of using this coding framework are twofold: firstly it is an established method for coding attention to policy issues, and secondly

it renders the content of agendas comparable across institutional venues and over time (Baumgartner et al. 2011). What is coded as a health issue in legislation is also a health issue in party platforms and in the public agenda and the media. The policy topics covered by this data are listed in the Appendix, Table A1.

### Dependent variable

#### *Acts of the UK Parliament*

Acts of the UK Parliament are the primary legislative output of the UK. Each act is coded with a single topic indicating the primary focus of the legislation. The observed time point is the date upon which the act was signed into law. Primary legislation provides the government with opportunities both for agenda-setting and emphasis of particular issues, as well as implementation of substantive policy outputs. Acts of the UK Parliament are therefore the main means through which the government enacts its agenda and is able to fulfil previous policy promises.

### Independent variables

#### *Party platforms*

To examine party platforms we adapt a new dataset on the policy content of the election manifestos of political parties in Britain to create our government and opposition platform data. The manifestos data include the platforms of the governing party (i.e. the party of the prime minister) and the largest opposition party. The text of each manifesto is coded following the traditional quasi-sentence approach (Laver 2001; Laver and Garry 2000), with each quasi-sentence assigned a single unique topic code in relation to the policy content. The party manifesto data for Conservative and Labour parties is transformed into government and opposition platforms based on which of the parties is in control of parliament during this

period. These government and opposition platforms are equal to the policy content of the party agenda for the party in control of government and for the party in opposition.

### *The Speech from the Throne*

The Speech from the Throne (also known as the Queen's Speech) is the prominent annual statement that communicates the policy agenda of British government (Jennings et al. 2011b). It is forward-looking, and lists general policy priorities as well as specific measures that the executive intends to address in the upcoming session of parliament. Furthermore, it often differs from party mandates (see Bara 2005) capturing updates to the government's priorities over the course of a parliament. The policy content of each speech was divided into quasi-sentences, with each quasi-sentence assigned a single unique topic code. Because of the timing of the speech, which occurs at the beginning of each parliamentary session, the data is organized by parliamentary session. This temporal aggregation is used for all of the analyses in this paper.

Note that the Speech from the Throne measure included in the model of the legislative agenda is purged of any variation due to other independent variables by predicting the residuals of a model that includes the other independent variables (i.e. public priorities, media, government and opposition platforms). The residuals therefore represent the executive agenda independent of external pressures.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, the equation we use to predict the residuals takes the following form:

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<sup>3</sup> The result is a stronger fitting model with less multicollinearity than in alternative models that include the Speech from the Throne directly (not reported here). In this alternative model that does not purge the other independent variables the speech is no longer significant, but the models other findings remain unchanged.

$$QS_{it} = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 QS_{it-1} + \beta_2 MIP_{it-1} + \beta_3 Media_{it-1} + \beta_4 Platform(Gov)_{it} + \beta_5 Platform(Opp)_{it} \quad (1)$$

Where  $QS_{it}$  refers to the non-electoral mandate delivered by the executive at the start of each session of parliament indicating its priorities for topic  $i$  during the forthcoming parliamentary year  $t$ .  $MIP_{it-1}$  refers to public attention to the policy issue during the previous parliamentary year.  $Media_{it-1}$  refers to media attention to the issue.  $Platform(Gov)_{it}$  refers to the number of mentions of topic  $i$  in the platform of the election-winning party during the most recent election and  $Platform(Opp)_{it}$  refers to the number of mentions of the topic in the platform of the losing party.

#### *Public priorities*

To measure public priorities, we use lagged aggregate responses about the ‘most important issue’ (MII) facing the country (as collected by the polling organization Ipsos-MORI). This follows previous studies that use data on the ‘most important problem’ to measure the public prioritization of issues at particular points in time (e.g. Jones 1994; Baumgartner and Jones 2004; Bevan and Jennings 2014). These measures have been shown to exhibit a high degree of common variation, and thus a comparable indicator of the policy concerns and issues on people’s minds at a particular point in time (Jennings and Wlezien 2011). These are recoded to correspond to the Policy Agendas Project major topic codes.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Mass media*

To control for the wider societal agenda (in the continuous flow of information about new problems facing government) we include a measure of the lagged media agenda in our

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<sup>4</sup> The analysis excludes two topics on which responses were consistently equal to zero over time: Commerce (15) and Science (17).

models. This is generated from coding the policy content of headlines of all front page news stories in *The Times of London* from every Wednesday. It simultaneously captures the media agenda as well as shifts in attention due to events.<sup>5</sup>

## Analyses

### *The party mandate*

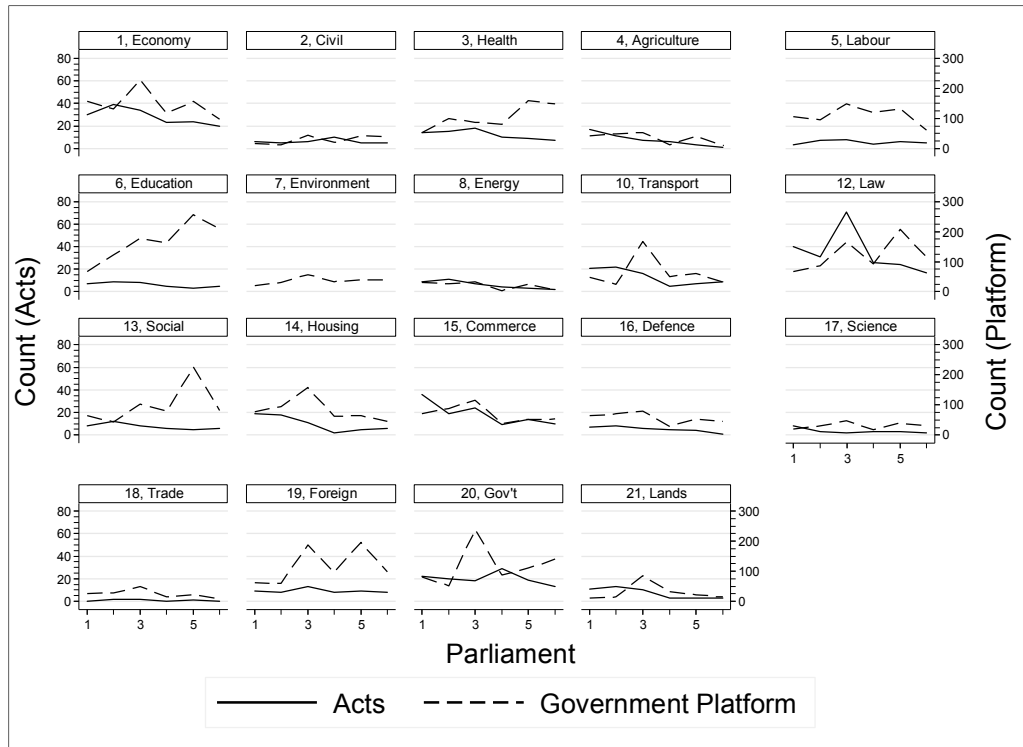
The data on the issue attention of the governing party platform and the legislative agenda of British government, aggregated over the lifetime of each parliament, are presented in Figure 1. This displays the number of Acts of the UK Parliament relating to a given topic in a given parliament (on the left-hand y-axis) compared to the number of mentions of the issue in the platform of the governing party at the preceding election (indicated on the right-hand y-axis). Through a visual inspection of the data there is some evidence of common movement in attention to issues in the platform of the election winner and in the legislative program of government. For example, the attention of the government platform and legislative agendas to the environment, energy, law and order, commerce, defence, and foreign trade all exhibit similar trends or fluctuations. This is suggestive of influence of the party mandate, but requires further investigation.

**Figure 1.** Government Platforms and Legislative Agendas by Parliament, 1983-2008.

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the correlation between the public and media agendas across all issues is a rather small and insignificant 0.07, indicating that these reflect quite distinct sets of priorities. This may be because variation in the public agenda tends to reflect changes in the underlying ‘problem status’ of issues (see Wlezien 2005; Jennings and Wlezien 2011), whereas the media agenda tends to include a more episodic focus on events and policies as part of the news cycle.





To test our expectations concerning the party mandate and the effect of the opposition, time series cross-sectional autoregressive distributed lag (ADL) models are used to account for the autoregressive nature of the legislative agenda. We assess the overall strength of the party mandate, in the transmission of party platforms into the legislative agenda enacted throughout the subsequent parliament by pooling across the various issues addressed by government.<sup>6</sup> While it is certainly true that different issues should respond to input agendas at varying rates (see Bevan and Jennings 2014), our question and theory does

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<sup>6</sup> The pooling of series is often a concern when heterogeneity across series is likely, such as in political campaigns or across states (e.g. Kaplan et al. 2006). However as our models focus on a single institutional agenda, during a single time period and in one country pooling both justified and is the most appropriate way to consider the functioning of the entire agenda especially given the interconnected nature of government attention to issues (see Jennings et al. 2011).

not focus on by-issue variation, but instead on how the overall policy agenda is formed (see Bevan et al. 2011) which is made possible by use of the policy content coding system for measuring attention to all issues. This tests the degree to which governments in general deliver on the party mandate over the duration of their time in office and how they respond to the opposition platform. The equation takes the form:

$$Laws_{ip} = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 Laws_{ip-1} + \beta_2 Platform(Gov)_{ik-1} + \beta_3 Platform(Opp)_{ik-1} \quad (2)$$

Where  $Laws_{ip}$  refers to the number of Acts of the UK Parliament for topic  $i$  during the current parliament  $p$ ,  $Laws_{ip-1}$  refers to the number of Acts for topic  $i$  during the previous parliament  $p-1$ , and  $Platform(Gov)_{ik-1}$  refers to the number of mentions of topic  $i$  in the party platform of the election-winner at the most recent election  $k-1$ <sup>7</sup>, and  $Platform(Opp)_{ik-1}$  refers to the number of mentions in the platform of the losing party. This model specification enables us to ascertain the strength of the party mandate from platform into legislative outputs over the lifetime of a parliament, controlling for persistence of the legislative agenda at an aggregated level.

The results of the time series cross-sectional ADL models, for 19 policy topics over the course of 5 elections (N=95), are reported in Table 1.<sup>8</sup> These confirm that the legislative

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<sup>7</sup> We use the notation  $k-1$  to indicate that the government and opposition platform measures are observed at the previous election and therefore occur *prior to* Acts of UK Parliament in each parliament and in our later models, for each given year.

<sup>8</sup> The short time series of 5 elections and later 26 years for our second set of analyses is a concern for the properties of asymptotic theory. Despite an N of 95 and 425 respectively the coefficients are likely downwardly biased with estimates from time series cross-sectional

agenda of government is highly persistent between parliaments, where the significant coefficient of 0.66 in the third model indicates that two-thirds of the issues addressed in the previous parliament are attended to in the current parliament. The three models presented in Table 1 consider the possible effect of the governing and opposition party platforms in influencing the legislative agenda of government. The third model reveals that when both platforms are included in the analysis, there is evidence that the governing party platform is translated into its subsequent legislative agenda, with the effect being positive and significant at the 95 per cent confidence level (0.037\*). In terms of substantive interpretation of the results, this means it takes approximately 27 quasi-sentence mentions of the economy in the government platform to be translated into an Act of Parliament on the issue (i.e.  $0.037 \times 27 = 0.999$ ). Given that the average length of a party platform during this period is 1,235 quasi-sentences this effect size is not inconsequential. The results are therefore consistent with the expectation of a direct mandate from the platform of the election winner and governing party to the legislative program of government. However, there is no support for the expectation that the issues receiving attention in the platform of the main opposition party would be also reflected in the legislative agenda. These findings fit with previous studies of the party mandate in Britain (e.g. Hofferbert and Budge 1992). As it stands, there is a case that party mandates deliver promissory representation in the legislative arena in the British case.

**Table 1.** Time Series Cross-Sectional Analyses of Party Platforms and Acts of Parliament.

	Acts <sub>ipt</sub>	Acts <sub>ipt</sub>	Acts <sub>ipt</sub>
Acts <sub>ip-1</sub>	0.634*** (0.177)	0.668*** (0.193)	0.661*** (0.174)

models dependent on the length of time. However, this downward bias reduces the likelihood of finding significant effects and thus offers a tougher test of our theory.

Platform(Gov) <sub>ik-1</sub>	0.028 (0.015)		0.037* (0.017)
Platform(Opp) <sub>ik-1</sub>		0.01 (0.026)	-0.023 (0.027)
Constant	0.493 (1.349)	1.923 (1.707)	0.53 (1.384)
$R^2$	0.57	0.54	0.57
$N$	95	95	95

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

#### *A unified model of party mandates, attention-driven choice and the legislative agenda*

We next turn to the effect of electoral mandates accounting for the influence of other intervening factors on the legislative agenda. To accomplish this, we estimate a model of the legislative agenda for each parliamentary year. This includes those years between elections with measures of the governing and opposition party platforms being repeated in each year.<sup>9</sup> This allows us to account for the simultaneous effects of mandates, the executive agenda, public concerns and the emergence of new policy problems and issues requiring immediate attention outside its expected set of priorities. Reflecting our theoretical expectations concerning mandates, the executive agenda and rational anticipation related to events and public opinion, the equation takes the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Laws}_{it} = & \alpha_0 + \beta_1 \text{Laws}_{it-1} + \beta_2 \text{QS(Residuals)}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{MIP}_{it-1} + \beta_4 \text{Media}_{it-1} \\ & + \beta_5 \text{Platform(Gov)}_{ik-1} + \beta_6 \text{Platform(Opp)}_{ik-1} \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Where  $\text{Laws}_{it}$  refers to the number of Acts of the UK Parliament for topic  $i$  during the current parliamentary year  $t$ .  $\text{Laws}_{it-1}$  refers to the number of Acts for topic  $i$  during the

<sup>9</sup> These models were also tested for just the years following an election leading to the same inferences.

previous year.  $QS(Residuals)_{it}$  refers to the non-electoral mandate delivered by the executive at the start of each session of parliament which has been purged of the effects from the other independent variables in the model.  $MIP_{it-1}$  refers to public attention to the policy issue during the previous parliamentary year.  $Media_{it-1}$  refers to media attention to the issue.<sup>10</sup>  $Platform(Gov)_{ik-1}$  refers to the number of mentions of topic  $i$  in the platform of the election-winning party during the most recent election  $k-1$  and  $Platform(Opp)_{ik-1}$  refers to the number of mentions in the platform of the losing party. This model specification enables us to ascertain the strength of the party mandate from platform into legislative outputs over the lifetime of a parliament, controlling for persistence of the legislative agenda at an aggregated level. It also enables us to directly compare effects of party mandates with updating of attention in response to the emergence of new issues of wider public concern.

Our time series cross-sectional analyses of Acts of Parliament are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Time Series Cross-Sectional Analyses of Acts of Parliament.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
$Acts_{it-1}$	0.528** (0.075)	0.512** (0.012)	0.498** (0.012)	0.496** (0.077)
$QS(Residuals)_{it-1}$	0.190** (0.050)	0.188** (0.050)	0.187** (0.050)	0.187** (0.050)
$MIP_{it-1}$	0.038** (0.012)	0.031* (0.074)	0.031* (0.078)	0.028* (0.012)
$Media_{it-1}$	0.009 (0.007)	0.008 (0.007)	0.008 (0.007)	0.008 (0.007)
$Platform(Gov)_{ik-1}$		0.005* (0.002)		0.003 (0.003)
$Platform(Opp)_{ik-1}$			0.007*	0.005

<sup>10</sup> Our use of a single lag fits with previous research, however alternative models including second lags for each variable led to poorer fitting models and did not produce any significant findings for these new variables (see Appendix 2) leading us to conclude that our model is appropriate.

			(0.003)	(0.004)
Constant	0.876**	0.582**	0.633**	0.506**
	(0.188)	(0.199)	(0.198)	(0.186)
$R^2$	0.407	0.416	0.416	0.420
$N$	425	425	425	425

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

In each of the models reported in Table 2, Acts of the UK Parliament exhibit a highly autoregressive nature, as indicated by the effect of the lagged dependent variable, which is positive and significant at the 95 per cent confidence level. The coefficient of around 0.5 on average means that around half the policy issues addressed in the previous legislative agenda are addressed in the next session of parliament. Following previous analyses of the transmission of the policy agenda from the Queen's Speech to Acts of Parliament the model also includes a measure of the content of the Queen's Speech (Bevan et al. 2011); namely the residuals of the Queen's Speech to account for the separate effects of the speech and the content of the speech as determined by government and opposition platforms, public priorities and the media agenda. The residuals exert a strong positive and significant effect on Acts in each of the four models in Table 2 indicating that in part Acts of Parliament are determined by the independent content of the speech's non-electoral mandate. Each model also reveals a positive and significant effect of lagged public priorities, consistent with previous studies of dynamic agenda representation in the UK (Bevan and Jennings 2014). This suggests that the legislative agenda of government responds more consistently to public priorities than party platforms (where effects are mixed), suggesting that at least some degree of representation falls to the party system agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010) and not merely party agendas. There is no effect for the media agenda in any of the models. It is plausible that changes in the problem status of issues are transmitted via salience of the issue to the public and via past values of the party and legislative agendas.

The effect of government and opposition platforms on Acts of Parliament is quite mixed. Models 2 and 3 exhibit positive and significant effects of attention to issues in government and opposition platforms respectively on the legislative agenda, but when both are included in Model 4, these cease to be significant, although the coefficients remain positive. The substantial correlation between platforms (0.71), combined with their tendency to move together and have the same positive effect on the legislative agenda, is the most likely reason for this null finding.<sup>11</sup> Despite the effect size being greater for the opposition platforms than the governing party, the overall effect of the government's program on the legislative agenda is much greater when considering the combined effects for the Queen's Speech and its platform. Combined, the results presented in Table 2 offer support for our expectations concerning the party system agenda.

## **Conclusion**

Representative party government must reconcile forces that are constantly in conflict. The array of issues that political parties and governments are under pressure to react to at any moment in time are a function of past policy priorities and commitments. Election platforms of parties similarly tend to reflect longstanding commitments to issues, which are the source of party reputations and images (Petrocik 1996). Alongside this path dependence in party and policy agendas, the rational anticipation of future electoral costs leads for pressure to parties to attend to new issues and problems in government. In this paper we have sought to test the

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<sup>11</sup> While there is little reason to combine the party platforms on the government and opposition theoretically, an alternative model with a single combined measure of party platforms did lead to a positive and significant effect of 0.0037 with the other inferences remaining the same. This result further demonstrates a degree of multicollinearity between the government and opposition platforms.

influence of party mandates on the legislative agenda in Britain between 1983 and 2008. While there is partial evidence that the policy agenda is responsive to the party system agenda – with governing and opposition party platforms having a small effect on Acts of Parliament, when modeled in isolation – the preponderance of evidence suggests that the legislative agenda of British government tends to be strongly influenced by external pressures such as public opinion. This is consistent with the original observation of Budge and Farlie (1983; also Budge and Hofferbert 1992) that parties tend to compete on the relative emphasis of priorities rather than directly opposed public policies. In government, parties must divide their scarce attention between competing alternatives. Our findings indicate the importance of deconstructing the determinants of the policy agenda to help understand the causes of policy change.

That parties must divide their scarce attention between competing alternatives has important implications for mandate theory. Parties' ability to stick to their mandate largely depends on how they balance their attention between their electoral promises, the promises of their opponents, the agenda of the executive, and the issues salient to the public at the present time. Parties in government are faced with an array of competing concerns, some of which may require them to tear up their pledges, others which may force them to postpone existing policy commitments. Our attention-driven model of party government has highlighted this balancing of scarce attention with responsiveness to external pressures.

Our findings raise a number of questions for future investigation. The most important of these concerns generalizability. To what extent might this model of party mandates and policy agendas be adapted to other political systems? While our evidence is limited to the highly majoritarian case of the UK, empirical support for different components of this model have been found in other country-specific and comparative studies; such as on party mandates (e.g. McDonald and Budge 2005; Froio 2013; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave



2014), the non-electoral mandates expressed in executive speeches (e.g. Lovett et al 2015) and the responsiveness of policy agendas to public priorities (e.g. Jones et al. 2009; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Lindeboom 2012). One might expect the degree of transmission of electoral mandates to policy agendas would be a function of the institutional features of different political systems (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014); such as divisions of powers, differences between unitary and federal systems, and how the relative fragmentation of party systems structures government formation (and limits the ability of parties to deliver on their promises). The extent to which our findings are generalizable will depend on such factors. Clearly the features of the UK system would suggest a higher rate of transmission than many other political systems, such as the US (e.g. Lovett et al 2015). Beyond this, does the fulfillment of party mandates or short-term responsiveness to changes in public opinion lead to better (or worse) election outcomes for incumbents? And to what extent are party platforms themselves a function of public priorities? We have not examined the role of elections in conditioning responsiveness of platforms or legislative agendas here. These clearly are important lines for further inquiry. Finally, party competition focuses on both attention and preferences while our work only considers the former. Divergent policy positions adopted on the same issues by parties (see Klingemann et al. 1994) and attempts to be seen as the party most trusted to deal competently with issues where there is broad consensus over ends, i.e. ‘valence issues’ (Stokes 1963), are further possible dimensions of party competition that our findings may speak to. Nevertheless, this analysis has made a start in revealing how an attention-based approach can shed light on how governments balance responsiveness to electoral mandates and more short-term fluctuations in public opinion.

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## APPENDIX 1

**Table A1.** UK Policy Agendas Project Major Topic Codes.

1. Macroeconomics
2. Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration and Civil Liberties
3. Health
4. Agriculture
5. Labour and Employment
6. Education
7. Environment
8. Energy
10. Transportation
12. Law, Crime, and Family Issues
13. Social Welfare
14. Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues
15. Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce
16. Defence
17. Space, Science, Technology and Communications
18. Foreign Trade
19. International Affairs and Foreign Aid
20. Government Operations
21. Public Lands and Water Management (Territorial Issues)

# APPENDIX 2

Table B1: Time Series Cross-Sectional Analyses of Acts of Parliament, Two Platform Lags.

	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Acts <sub>it-1</sub>	0.441*** (0.089)	0.431*** (0.095)	0.432*** (0.093)
QS(Residuals) <sub>it-1</sub>	0.213*** (0.055)	0.210*** (0.055)	0.212*** (0.055)
MIP <sub>it-1</sub>	0.031* (0.015)	0.032* (0.016)	0.029 (0.015)
Media <sub>it-1</sub>	0.010 (0.009)	0.011 (0.009)	0.010 (0.009)
Platform(Gov) <sub>ik-1</sub>	0.005* (0.003)		0.004 (0.003)
Platform(Gov) <sub>ik-2</sub>	0.002 (0.003)		0.001 (0.003)
Platform(Opp) <sub>ik-1</sub>		0.007 (0.005)	0.003 (0.006)
Platform(Opp) <sub>ik-1</sub>		0.002 (0.004)	0.000 (0.004)
Constant	0.392 (0.200)	0.564* (0.221)	0.398* (0.194)
$R^2$	0.391	0.386	0.392
$N$	340	340	340

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

Table B2: Time Series Cross-Sectional Analyses of Acts of Parliament, Two Lags.

	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Acts <sub>it-1</sub>	0.456*** (0.090)	0.446*** (0.095)	0.446*** (0.093)
QS(Residuals) <sub>it-1</sub>	0.199*** (0.055)	0.194*** (0.056)	0.197*** (0.055)
QS(Residuals) <sub>it-2</sub>	-0.055 (0.054)	-0.061 (0.054)	-0.056 (0.054)
MIP <sub>it-1</sub>	0.075 (0.039)	0.076 (0.039)	0.075 (0.039)
MIP <sub>it-2</sub>	-0.046 (0.039)	-0.046 (0.038)	-0.048 (0.039)
Media <sub>it-1</sub>	0.014 (0.016)	0.014 (0.017)	0.014 (0.016)
Media <sub>it-2</sub>	-0.006 (0.015)	-0.005 (0.015)	-0.005 (0.015)
Platform(Gov) <sub>ik-1</sub>	0.005* (0.002)		0.004 (0.003)
Platform(Gov) <sub>ik-2</sub>	0.002 (0.003)		0.001 (0.003)
Platform(Opp) <sub>ik-1</sub>		0.007 (0.005)	0.003 (0.005)
Platform(Opp) <sub>ik-1</sub>		0.002 (0.004)	0.001 (0.004)
Constant	0.365 (0.200)	0.530* (0.219)	0.363 (0.192)
$R^2$	0.397	0.392	0.399
$N$	340	340	340

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001